

LEARNING LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

The experiences of learning and leadership development within central city communities to support the activities of a social justice movement are the central focus of this phenomenological research investigation. Informants, identified with nominations from the membership represented the diversity of religious ideology, ethnicity, gender and educational achievement of the coalition. In a three-stage interview process, data collected revealed the leaders' history, activities and meaning perspectives. Learning processes and implementation, the essential inquiry of the investigation, occur within the community of leaders. In the community-based context, learning modalities included active engagement, problem solving, modeling, mentoring, and critical reflection. Opportunities characterized as multicultural and ecumenical engaged the most significant learning. Relationships that endorsed, empowered, and agitated were crucial in the activity of learning. Within the community of learners, action was the prevailing source of new thinking. Most importantly, the meaning leaders attributed to their leadership centered on faith values. Emitting from passionate self-interest, the meaning making ranged among values of faith, social justice, and citizenship. Underpinning the work are faith values for social justice.

Among the roots of adult education are social movements and action in the public arena. Evident at the turn of the 20th century were activism and social movements alongside clubs, radio forums, and kitchen meetings. As we enter the 21st century, social responsibility is revisiting the North American sector of the global landscape. Growing numbers of citizens worldwide are participating in nongovernmental and nonpartisan political activity (Wildemersch, Finger, Jansen, 2000). Contemporary studies reveal that citizens are questioning authority, government, and global capitalism (Inglehart, 1999). Increasingly, they are acting on concerns for democracy outside the traditional public spaces available to them. "Social action, community organizing, and new social movements are characteristic of citizen activity in a reclaiming of civil space" (Scott, 2001, p. 1). Undeniably, community organizing is on the rise.

The value of social action in urban communities is dependent upon effective leadership that represents the local community and is organizationally sufficient (McGaughey, 1992). A significant source of prospective leaders is faith-based organizations, one of the more stable constituents of the urban context (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Within faith-based communities exists the potential to inspire, develop, and sustain leadership capacity (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990). Adult learning strategies supporting the capacity building energize the renewal of local communities and affect positive change to counter the dramatic and continual shifts of the urban landscape. Leadership learning in central city communities is simultaneously a process and an outcome.

Theoretical Framework and Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological research investigated, analyzed, and described the learning and leadership development within a social justice movement organized among urban faith-based communities. This inquiry focused with the overarching research question: *What are the learning experiences that contribute to the development of leaders in social movements organized in urban faith-based communities?* The study findings contribute to expanding the understanding of adult learning practices and theory in urban adult education sites, both formal and nonformal. The nature of the research question provides the rationale for using phenomenology. Consistent with my personal belief is phenomenological philosophy--- speaking from the perspective of the person whose first-hand knowledge is a lived experience. Understanding and knowledge are dynamic, constantly changing, and continuously occurring while one experience prepares for the next. Observed experiences increase awareness of others as well as ourselves, creating efficient

and effective participants in life. Everyday, ordinary life experiences are valid sources of knowledge. Residing in the world, experience is the source of knowing and, consequently, the basis of behavior. Insight into the nature of a situation is obtained by reflection that analyzes how it occurs in everyday life. Any experience contributing to awareness is the foundation of a person's knowledge of themselves, others, and the world (Becker, 1992).

With phenomenology's substantial history in philosophy and sociology, the goal for the phenomenologist's interpretation is understanding social phenomena from the actor's own perspective plus an examination of how the world is experienced (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The important reality is what the participants perceive it to be. The forces that move human beings, as human beings rather than simply human bodies, are internal ideas, feelings, and motives, all of which are meaningful material. The intent of empirical phenomenological research is to establish what an experience means for the people who have had the experience and are able to furnish a complete description of it (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Research Design and Data Analysis

This research study engaged leaders of ACTS (Area Congregations Tackling systems), working for justices on the issues affecting residents of a Midwest Rustbelt city. A multi-racial, multi-ethnic interfaith collaboration, ACTS is composed of forty-six congregations representing nine religious denominations among the membership. With its purpose and plans focused on critical social issues, ACTS addresses the needs of the community through education and solidarity in action. Community organizers are empowered by a formal process of leadership training delivered by the Gamaliel Foundation. Among the issues, activities, and functional committees are Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment (AODA), Jobs and Economic Development, Youth, Immigration, Education, Voter Registration and Awareness, and Labor. The research informants, leaders of ACTS, were selected by asking among the membership. Inquiring among organization executives, board representatives, and church officials effective leaders were identified with the snowball or chain type of obtaining nominations of cases of interest from members who know what cases were information-rich (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In a three-stage interview process of formal, semi-structured, individual interviews with open-ended questions, data collected revealed leaders' history, activities and meaning perspectives (Creswell, 1998, Miles & Huberman, 1994; Siedman, 1998).

After the coding and creation of categories of meanings and meaning units, a system of matrices assisted the analysis of what all leaders in the investigation said about the specific research questions posed. To analyze qualitative data, Miles and Huberman (1994) stress the importance of numerous displays that relate and demonstrate differences between the variable under investigation. The matrices were developed to analyze data related to the three categories of research questions regarding leadership history and relationship with the coalition, learning experiences and processes of the leaders and the framework for meaning making by the leaders.

Findings

Most importantly, the meaning attributed by the learners to their leadership centered on faith values. The learning processes, intentional and incidental occurred within the community of learners, affiliations reflecting the multiple diversities of the coalition's membership (Horton, 1990). Empowerment strategies included the development of self-awareness and agitation. Learning modalities included active engagement, problem solving, modeling, mentoring, and critical reflection. Relationships, crucial in the learning process, endorsed, empowered, and agitated the process of learning in the community of leaders. Action was the prevailing source of new thinking (Freire, 1970, 1985). Most significant for practice is engaging community based adult learners within their own context, focusing on their identified concerns, and engaging in active projects or exercises relevant to their day to day experiences. The authenticity of the work creates meaning, while learning is both intentional and incidental (Shor 1992, 1996).

Influence of Adult Learning Theory

There is substantial evidence of the influence of adult learning theory of Freire (1970, 1985) and Horton (1990) in the content and structure of the Gamaliel Foundation training that guides the work of ACTS. Evident in the delivery design and the adult learning theory is the influence of Highlander (2000); namely, the residential format of the week-long training and the social network among the participants.

Paulo Freire familiarized educators with his strategies, to promote conscientization, originally designed for literacy education. The strategies and tactics are profound in their simplicity, conforming to advice frequently given by Paulo Freire, namely that one should be “simple” but never “simplistic.” In ACTS, the simple tenets are commonly known, understood, and frequently implemented, offering the learners a collaborative basis for engaging with others in numerous learning opportunities. Repetition promotes the development of skills transferable to other arenas of application and practice. I describe the dynamic bond of interaction characteristic among the leaders in the learning community like a tapestry, colorful and complicated but cohesive and finely woven. The leaders are integrated in a network of caring relationships and action. The inseparable alignment between the learners and the experiential elements of the learning context creates purposeful meaning for the leaders.

Set within a framework of radical social change, Freire's (1970) approach, personal empowerment, and social transformation are intertwined, inseparable processes. Central to the learning is a changed relationship between the teacher and learners considered co-investigators into their common reality, the sociocultural situation in which they live. Freire's (1970) ultimate goal is liberation, or praxis, the action and reflection of learners upon their world in order to transform it. Emerging out of a context of poverty, illiteracy, and oppression, Freire's idea of the learning process is depicted as the continuous cycle of dialogue and reflection producing action or praxis that may be the transformation of a meaning structure as well as a change in behavior. The active outcome results from a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000).

Unanticipated, the investigation revealed the influence of the best known community organizer. Saul Alinsky's (1969) model is incorporated into the Gamaliel Foundation training and subsequent tactics of ACTS. At the “Alinsky in Retrospect” seminar at Chicago's Columbia College in 1978, Horton reflected that Alinsky believed people in struggle expanded their perception of self-interest to encompass self-respect, dignity, and solidarity with their neighbors. They also used organizational activities for educational purposes, considered self-education. Alinsky was aware that the experiential learning of the people, particularly the professional organizers, was important. Essentially, there's a specific, limited goal for which people are organized and learning is a part of the process. Consistent with research results of Cunningham and Curry (1997), whether or not the problem gets solved, people have learned. Organizing is educational although obviously not academic-type teaching.

Organizing is learning which rests on people's life experiences, drawing them out, developing trust, going into action, disrupting old perceptions of reality, developing group solidarity, watching the growth of confidence to continue to act, then sharing the emotional foundation for continual questioning of the then current status quo. Learning is primarily in the action, but becomes liberating education only if the person develops the discipline to continuously reflect that action. By owning the question in this educational process, curiosity is prompted, leading to action, then reflection, then more action, and more reflection.

Context of the Learning Focus and Processes

Contextualized in the urban day-to-day environment of the central city, learning by evaluating was an active process integrated into the fabric of daily realities. Issue centered learning focused on the resolution of problematic concerns of the constituency. Dewey's (1971) experiential learning represented by “trying” and “undergoing” partially explains the process of learning engaged in the

problem-focused learning efforts of ACTS. Social learning theory's (Lefrancois, 1996) assertion that people learn from observing others qualifies the learning acquired in the community of leaders. As each learner developed at her [or his] own pace, response from the results of active behavior or reaction from the environment, created an impact theorized Bandura (1986). The subsequent reactions from the environment or effects of action led to new thinking and influenced new or revised behavior or action. The relevance of the concept is the notion of reciprocal influence that people have on their environment, which in turn influences the way they behave. The importance is that the learning of the leaders resulted in actions that produced outcomes or changes effected by the leaders' actions. Consequently, continuous influence on thinking and future behavior occurred. Environment, behavior, cognitive and other personal factors function interactively as determinants of each other. In the urban environment, within the context of the organization, and in the community of leaders, the problems addressed were issues or common concerns of the constituency.

The relationships established by the leaders and membership across cultural and religious ideological boundaries grounded the individuals with common values while providing a "learning laboratory" in the social network, not unlike the effects of Horton's model of Highlander. The social ties among the members and, in some instances, external community affiliations, advanced the ideals of social justice and self-interest. Situated within the community of learners, the social exchanges among the leaders were dynamic, interactive, and functioned as learning processes. Long-term benefits include the development of social capital. Social movements earn credit for the creation of social capital by fostering new identities and extending social networks (Putnam, 2000).

Value and Purpose of the Work

Most importantly, the mission and work of ACTS were purposeful for the learners. The fundamental element of the affiliation was faith-based. Shaped by the commonly shared value of faith, the value mutually enhanced the relationships and learning processes engaged to accomplish the work. This is the key: ACTS is a coalition of communities rooted in deep faith. The members represent the dynamic, living church where people sing, pray, laugh, cry, struggle, and learn together. They also support and challenge each other to act on their deepest concerns and values. Among church members are the family-like associations that permit authentic revelations of doubt, rage, and inadequacy. Through the trusting relationships, opportunities and challenges arise.

To build the alternative vision of a transformed society, one more true to the democratic values, requires a grassroots base in the neighborhoods, congregations and workplaces where most people live their lives. Societal reformation emerges with individual change that leads to small group then large group change. Ultimately, individual faith values, acted upon in consort with others cherishing the same values, are reflected in the culture and behavior in the systems of society.

Implications for Adult Learning Practice

These findings suggest that fluid, open structures permitting entry, support, engagement, retreat, or exit at the will of the learner facilitate greater freedom to learn and develop. Learning and its pace are self-determined. The findings also suggest that culturally specific models provided in the community of learners increased the self-awareness and advancement of emerging leaders. The network of affiliation among leaders was an interactive web of learning where learners were able to access resources at the exact time of need. In the amalgamated illustration of practice and theory, Figure 1 demonstrates the action and complexity of the environment of the learning context. In this figure can be seen the interaction of each of the learners with one another and within the environmental context. Impacted by the existence of the ACTS and the actions of the leaders, the environment is continuously affected. While each learner acts and thinks independently, engaged in praxis, they influence the action, dialogue, and reflection of one

another. The result is a dynamic in which the relationships have fluid boundaries and most predictable is action and positive social change.

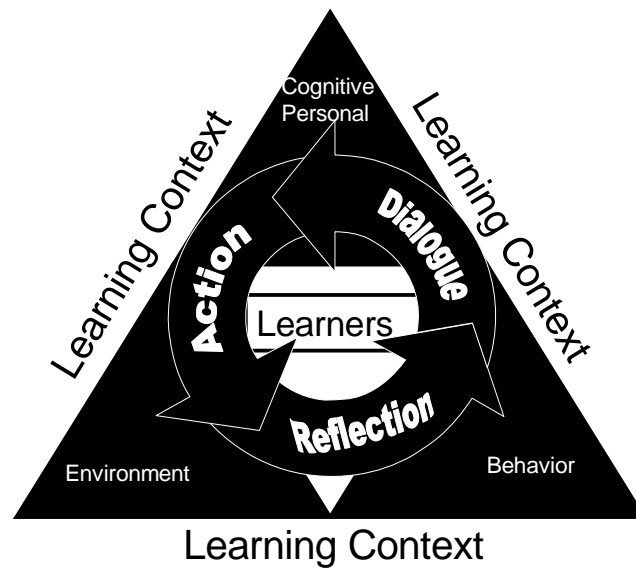


Figure 1: Interaction of Learners Within the Community of Leaders

There is implication for adult educators' implicit knowledge of the elements of formal, nonformal - community-based, and nonformal – faith-based learning frameworks of adult learning. An analysis of learning sites, participant characteristics, opportunity and access, motivations, context, learning experiences and outcomes is a useful tool for effectiveness. Illustrated as an emerging model, the notion results from collaboration with Isaac's (1999) research.

Frameworks of Adult Learning

	Formal	Nonformal	Faith-based Formal & Nonformal
Sites	Educational institutions, Corporate training	Community-based (may be faith organization sites)	Faith-based (community site)
Participants			
Opportunity and Access			
Motivation			
Context			
Learning Experiences			
Outcomes			

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